
The Walker in the Dust
Book I
BROKEN
by Russell Ackerman

The Walker in the Dust, Book 1:

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By

Russell Ackerman

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Second Edition

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ISBN-13: 978-1493704941

ISBN-10: 149370494X

DEDICATION

I dedicate this to my wife Kim, who hates apocalypse fiction but loves me dearly. You make my life worth living.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I’d like to acknowledge my father Edward Ackerman who always marked up my essays with lots of red pen, and also my creative writing 301 teacher Bruce Pratt who taught me that the best stories are about people, and my wife for putting up with me while I write fiction.

1 DECISIONS

Should I leave her to die? I look down at my wife’s bruised, tired, unconscious body. I haven’t had a woman in a long time.

Oasis is far away but I am too weak and dehydrated to carry her. Dark is coming and the giant scorpions will be on the prowl, along with slavers, mutants, and goddess knows what else. "Bless you. May the sands of time take you to oasis."

The traditional prayer I whisper on tired lips. I have heard of others in situations like this. They always end badly. I put my gun to her head, turn away and fire. I check her pulse, just to make sure. I cry. I set off into the evening twilight, wondering about what I had done.

The wastes.The heat.The death. You lose your humanity in the end.

At least, I console myself, she is at peace, and did not die at the hands of someone less than human. I wipe the tears from my eyes. There are none.

Welcome to the dust.

2 SENTENCED

They have sentenced me to being flayed to death. I grip the bars of the cage and hang on my arms. How long will they keep me here, waiting? And for what?

I have broken the law of the wasteland. There is only one law in anarchy,

"do no harm."

I had killed her, yes, but I had saved her from suffering. The guard looks in my direction with red swollen, cataract eyes. Once, he and I had been friends. We had scavenged together, laughed together. We had found tech together, cried together. He's sunblind now. Always hated wearing goggles.

"Don't cry old friend," he says.

My eyes sting. At least there is water to shed here, in oasis. The laws of men are harsh and unloving. What goodness is fulfilled by punishing an honest heart? I had told my story about the girl I murdered last night at the fire-pit. I feel like I did the right thing. What do we do when the laws of men fail? I look out from the bars at the glinting sun. I am no criminal. I am a good man.

In the dark of night the guard releases me. He says, "go to the wastes and don't come back. Oasis is no place for you. Civilized folk.. They don't understand the wanderers, the hard choices we make between death and worse death. You can't come back here again."

He gives me a .22 pistol and a few bullets. I hug him and look out into the night. Where will I go? How will I survive? I have no equipment. All my years of gathering tech, wasted. Taken from me by the lawman.

But I know already. The scorpions will take care of me. It’s the less worse death than being flayed alive by the 'civilized folk'. My old comrade saved me in his own way. The wastelander way.

I go out into the night and as I stumble forward I listen for the tell-tale clicking

claws of the giant scorpions, who will at least kill me mercifully. But if I can make it a few miles, just a few more steps, I might survive the night.

3 THE FACTS

Untold years ago there was an end of things. Nukes rained down on the earth and the world was destroyed. The combined nuclear fire set off uranium deposits in the Earth and afterwards, only the wasteland remained. Many chemical and biological weapons were released. Only the very strongest people survived and carried on.

Humans kept reproducing, having babies, raising babies in the safety of the

underground vaults. Most were not so lucky. There were babies in caves, babies in the wastes, babies near trash, babies suckling the nutrients out of mothers who could barely survive themselves. But over thousands of years, the wasteland changed.

No longer can you find a can of beans, or evaporated milk, or packaged jerky and twinkies, just empty packages where someone else has gotten there before you. Humanity learned to hunt the mutated creatures of the wastes to survive.

For uncounted generations wastelanders have feared the giant scorpion. They say the scorpion was once a the size of a cat but over many generations it grew larger as the smaller, more stupid ones were killed off. Soon the tables were turned and we became the hunted.

No one ventures out at night when they are out to feed. It is certain death. Unless you are lucky enough to have a rocket launcher, let alone a supply of rockets. Most wastelanders carry a spear, and if you've traveled the wastes long enough they called you a tribal.

Things are evolving. The wasteland is changing. Mutant fruit trees grow in the cracked earth. Iguanas wander the wastes, consuming what insects remain, and they are hunted for their succulent meat.

Eat enough of anything and you'll die of radiation. Everyone dies of radiation. You don't see any old folks, just young, fearful faces, and you learned to eat less or perish even earlier, and if you're really unlucky, you'll go feral, lose your humanity and become an animal.

To live is to die. That's the first thing every kid learns in this god forsaken hell.

4 DEATH

The pack of giant scorpions gather around me, claws clicking, teeth chittering, and I collapse from exhaustion that I put off for too long. My death does not come.

I wait. Still, I do not feel my flesh tearing, my body burning from their poison. I wait. Finally I open my eyes. A stinger hovers above my face, and a drop of poison hangs glistening in the moonlight, an offer of quick death. Noble death.

I look at the scorpion in front of me. It's small black eyes twinkle and the mouth-pieces vibrate, making that awful sound. The claws open and close. Open and close. It is the sound of death.

I open my mouth and lift my head with my last strength and drink the poison. I burn. I burn and I burn but I do not die. My vision turns black. The sounds of claws and teeth disappear. I see a place, green, full of life. Deer and dragonflies and palm trees.

Flying above, I look down over the verdant hills. The vision disappears. I am scorching. I scratch madly at my skin, I scratch and I writhe an agony. All I can see is the scorpions eyes. Dark black marbles set in the face of an angel of death. I lay there in pain and wonder

when death will come. I look up at the moon, a sliver smiling down at me.

The scorpions turn in unison, their legs tapping at the scorched earth, their great bodies rotating until all but one faced away from me. Are they like wasps? Will they drag me back to the nest, implant me with eggs? Have I been saved from one fate, only to come upon one worse than being flayed alive?

Or did they sense something in the darkness? I look up at the stars, the beings that guided me on so many trips into the wasteland. How long will it take for the poison to kill me?

I feel stronger, wide awake and I want another draught of their liquid death. To finish me.To end the life of countless days, wandering, starving, thirsty, an

eternity of choosing between bad and worse. Fuck this planet.

"Finish me!" I scream at them, on my feet shouting, but they do not move.

One of them still looks at me with beady eyes. Why did they wait?

"Kill me you goddamn bugs!"

But she turns away. I pound on her chitin with my bare fists but she merely closes her eyes. I clamber over her and fall on my face beyond the circle of guardians. I make haste and soon they are distant, and the crickets fill my ears with song.

I feel more alive than ever. Alive. I am alive and I have no thirst, no hunger. Will they hunt me in the morning? Were they just ripening the kill? Sweetening the meat? My body tingles, as if it is finding

new life, and the familiar feelings of sore feet and back are gone.

What have I become? I look into a mirror as it lay there in the broken remains of a concrete road. In the pale light I can make out my face, and I wonder. Am I broken? Dreaming? Have I finally lost what sanity I have scraped and saved all these years? I slowly realize, I am not broken. It is only the mirror.

5 OLD PINE ELEMENTARY

I am hot and tired. The venom of the giant scorpion lingers in my veins. It's the end of the day, time to hole up somewhere

and be very, very quiet. The sign outside says Old Pine Elementary and I enter.

I see a filthy mattress with a body strung up in the air above it, dried blood, body parts and head missing. I touch it and it swings a little in the air, creaking back and forth, and my heart jumps as though it is a scorpion. My sixth sense tells me I am safe. The doors are all closed, and this man... He had died a long time ago.

I drop my pack and collapse onto the mattress. This dead man, he had sought solitude. Oasis is not far away, a few days walk. But he had been living here, until the raiders came. We call them raiders and slavers, they are wastelanders like us who’ve gone bad, who trade in death, drugs, and worse.

This man is obviously too old to make a good slave. Probably too hard headed like me. They say if you're captured by slavers the best thing to do is insult them and achieve your death for they are quick to anger. Better than living out life on a chain. There's toilet paper there, pencils, turpentine and a teddy bear. I open a nearby bottle. It's alcohol.

I take a swig and spit everywhere. I hate rotgut. But I drink it anyway and soon my worries ease. I pick up the teddy bear and hold it in my lap. Brown and burnt, with one button eye hanging by a thread. I rip it off. I wave its little arms and hold it up as though it were dancing. What am I doing? I should be looking for supplies.

"What do you think little one? Are they coming back?" But I know they aren't. I

feel safe. Feelings are everything. The goddess still watches over humankind. God has forsaken us, his creations turned to dust and monsters, but you can trust your feelings to get you by when your head is aching, tired, losing its senses. Trust your feelings. That's what mother said.

I hug the bear fiercely and a puff of dust goes up. I stifle a cough. The place is dark, dingy, trash everywhere, lockers littering the halls, chairs piled up in rooms, and burnt skeletons of children all around. It was ground zero and I knew I couldn't stay long because of radiation. One night probably won't kill me too much. My Geiger counter had been taken by the law man.

Law man. What a joke. Self-appointed officiandos, waving their guns and telling

people what to do. Don't rest your hand on your gun hilt or you might just get shot. They were usually drunk with alcohol they 'seize’ from some unlucky wastelander. There was only one in oasis but one was enough. People are sheep and they follow. If you are strong you are the leader... Or tyrant. That's the rule of the wastes.

I feel better than I have been. I lay down on the mattress and in my imagination I see the little girl who must have carried the teddy, probably brought for show and tell, everywastelander's favorite game.

I hear a clattering and my senses jump. I listen hard for several minutes, but all I can hear is my own breath. I hear a child crying and I listen harder, but I'm not sure

what I'm hearing. It could just be the wind. It's probably just rats.

I toss the teddy-bear aside and lay back, hugging the rotgut, my .22 pistol in my other hand. I stare up at the body rigged to the ceiling above me. It is strangely beautiful and foreboding.

So much death. The wasteland is filled with it. Everyone's a murderer. Killing to eat, killing to survive, killing yourself with radiation just for a safe place to sleep or to scavenge some tech. I flick my flashlight off and wonder in the dark if I will survive the night but am too exhausted to care. It's nice just to lay on a mattress and not the hard, burnt ground, dug into the trash somewhere to keep away from predators.

My eyes close and sleep comes to me. In the night I awaken and scratch at my

head with the barrel of the .22 pistol the guard had given me. My finger twitches involuntarily and I hear a click. Empty. I had better load it, just in case.

6 HUMANITY

In the morning I set out to explore the destroyed town of Pinevale. It's a desolate place. Everything interesting has already been looted by someone else. I can still hear the crying child and chalk it up to insanity. I am wrong.

As I walk down the road it becomes louder. I stop to investigate and step into the broken remains of someone's dream home. All that's left of the house are a few burnt sticks of wood and an armoire, and I open it.

Inside the dresser is a child, too young to be on her own. She's dirty and dehydrated, there are no tear stains on her face. She looks at me and cries from her green eyes, an awful, piercing sound of lament.

"Hey there little girl.. It's alright.. Where's momma? Quiet down ok?"

She's inconsolable. I put my hand over her mouth and only succeed in getting bit.

"Look at me.. Hey.. You thirsty?" and she nods her head between wails. I rummage in my pack for water. There’s dirt in it, like everthing else in the wastes, but she doesn't notice and gulps it down.

"Hungry?" I offer her some of my breakfast. A roasted iguana carcass lodged on a car antenna. She eats it, shuddering between bites. I try again.

"Where's mama?" I try to smile but only manage a grimace.

"Momma went to get fooooodwaaaaaa."

Crap. I see how the day is going to go.

"Come on, we can't stay here. Come with uncle Russ and we'll find your mama."

She shakes her head and wails, dropping the charred iguana. I pick it up, dust it off and take a thoughtful bite. I turn and feign leaving her behind. She clambers out of the dresser and takes a few steps towards me, stumbles and falls to her knees.

"Wait, please don't leave me to die!"

"Come on. I'll take care of you and maybe we can find your mom. Can you walk?"

She shakes her head and stretches her arms towards me. I go to pick her up but instead she hugs me tight.

"Don't leave me!"

"I won't. I'm gonna pick you up ok? What's your name?" She nods.

"Tee, "

I pick her up. What the hell am I gonna do now? I can't take her to oasis. I look around but cannot find her mother's trail. We can't stay here. Rule of the wasteland, don't linger, and keep moving.

I blink the dust from my eyes, squint at the horizon and trudge onward. My best bet is to find some friendly tribals to take care of her. I sure am not going to yell my head off looking for her mother, who is probably dead anyway. I doubt we will survive the night. That's nothing new.

I've been in the wasteland too long. My strength has returned but I have lost my will to live somewhere along the line, though she has not. Once I had been in love, with a beautiful girl. I don't want to think, ever again.

The little girl never takes her bright green eyes off of me, her small arms gripping me with renewing strength. I feel human again, for the first time in ages, I have a purpose beyond the next iguana.

I see distant smoke spiraling into the sky. I hike her up on my hip and set out beyond Pinevale. It's a better choice than no direction at all, though we might be heading towards a slaver's camp for all I know. But that's life in this hell, always choosing between bad, worse, and the unknown.

7 UNLIKELY FRIENDS

We walk into the wastes, away from Pinevale and its hidden horrors, into an unknown future. Tee has become strong enough to walk but the sniffles won't end. I have to think of a way to cheer her up.

"You like music?"

I can only think of one song, in all its irony. She nods. I clear my throat.

"The wastes are alive, with the sound of scorpids,vand the song they have sung, for a thousand years!"

My singing is good but all I can think of is that awful sound the scorpions make. The song is obviously written by a nut-job but it reminds me of home, the home I once had. Mother sung the song to me in

our canyon home. I am a born tribal, spear, bone necklace and all. I still wear the necklace.

"The wastes fill my heart with the sound of music, my heart wants to sing every song it hears!"

Tee manages a small smile. I notice a crow has been circling us for quite a while, probably planning to pluck out Tee's eyes.

"See that crow? I bet he's hungry. Here, take this and throw it." I hand her a small chunk of roast iguana. She looks at me like I'm crazy to waste the food but runs off and throws it anyway. We move away, stopping in the shade of a crabapple tree and sit down to take the edge off of weariness.

"Now watch."

From fifty yards off we sit silently as Tee drinks the last of my water. I don't need it anymore. I feel neither hunger nor thirst these days, though I force myself to eat. Since I drank the scorpion venom a part of me has died. My brain isn't working. I take a bite of lizard and offer her some. We wait.

The crow circles a bit and then lands, hops over to the bite and gulps it down. It stands there, lifting one foot and then the other from the hot ground, looking at us.

"Here, throw this as far as you can," and she does.

The crow hops closer and now we can make out her details. She has human looking eyes, yellow eyes, set beneath a heavy brow. What maybe once was feathers had become oily dark green scales. It clacks its beak at us, a warning,

but still comes closer. Instead of a sleek beak, there are rows of jagged teeth. Whatever it is it's no crow, not like I had seen before. It devours the treat in one gulp, lifting its face to the sky and jerking it's head backwards until the bite disappears down its throat. I check the .22 pistol, it’s still loaded.

Tee looks on in eagerness. "Here, throw it another,” I say, “so it lands a little closer to us and maybe we'll get a better look," and I rip off the iguanas head and hand it to her. She has a good arm on her and throws it with accuracy.

"It's a dragon," she says.

I laugh. "There's no such thing," I said, although I am alarmed at the thought of a fire breathing bird.

"Here, keep throwing bites," I hand her the greasy iguana and stand up to pick crabapple. The tree is loaded and soon I am fully involved in plucking the bitter fruit, forgetting the danger in my tiredness.

Twenty minutes later I have a plastic bag loaded with fruit and when I turn back to Tee the creature is sitting in her lap, purring. It's no crow, just another mutant that maybe in ages past had been a bird or lizard.

"Tee, don't move!" but she doesn't listen and pats and hugs the creature. I dart in close, kick it out of her arms and grab her to my side, "Don't go near it!" I say and it attacks me, leaping into the air to tear at my face with its talons. I fall

backwards, drop the gun and cover my face with my arms in surprise.

"No!" Tee screams and she plucks the creature off me, and now I see it's venomous tail hovering near her face, pointed at me.

"Shush" and she puts her hand on the bulbous stinger and lowers it, only to have the creature raise it again. Its overly large eyes watch my every move.

I'm standing in seconds, scrabbling for the gun and ready to shoot the mutant but by the goddess I realize Tee is not in danger. Whatever it is, it likes Tee. A long tongue emerges from its jaws and licks the dirt and sweat from her face while Tee giggles. I take a step closer and the creature begins to hiss.

"Tee, looks like you've made an unlikely friend, though she doesn't like me much."

"I know why, you kicked her! Her name is Triple Sec."

A single drop of venom hangs from the creature's hovering tail, which swings left and right in a slow, hypnotizing motion.

"You know what that is?" I ask Tee

"It's a crow," she says, running her hands over its sleek scales.

"No, no... Like you say, it's a dragon." I look up at the sky and ponder the time we lost. "Come on, we have to keep moving. Just keep it away from me, It hates me." I can still see the distant smoke which is our destination.

As we walk I take sidelong glances at the creature who keeps a close eye on me as well. Another mouth to feed. Or feed on us. Maybe it's all a ruse. Maybe it will pluck out our eyes in the night and feast on our corpses. But maybe, just maybe, Tee has made a friend. Obviously it’s some sort of mutated lizard with a busted sense of pair bonding.

"What next Tee, sorcerers and princesses?" And she looks up at me hopefully.

I laugh. For the first time in a long time I laugh and I just can't stop and Tee is laughing too. Finally I'm gripping my stomach and I'm crying, wasting water, and I force myself to calm. Dragons and sorcerers. What a joke. There's nothing like that in the wilds. Just dust, wind and mutants.

8 JUNKIES

We arrive at the camp just as the sun is setting. Destroyed cars are piled up around the entrance of an overpass, which makes a good spot to hide in for the night. Tee is tired as she has insisted on carrying her pet lizard all day long.

"Hold it! I've got a gun on you!" The local lawmaker shouts from the passenger seat of a car, high on the piles of junk. I reach out towards Tee to stop her and nearly lose my fingers to the winged creature she holds.

"We've come to trade," I say, the eternal free-pass to civilization.

The lizard hisses madly and as we take a few steps closer it frees itself from Tee's arms and flies off into the twilight. Good riddance. Tee looks after it longingly and I crouch down beside her.

"Stay close to uncle Russ ok?" and she looks at me and nods. We climb carefully over the junk and into the makeshift camp. There are four of them, junkies by the looks of it. One of them jabs a needle in her arm as we climb down. I have a nasty feeling about this place.

"Who wants to trade," I say, holding of a handful of iguana by the tail.

"What have you got?" one of them says, standing up from the fire. An emaciated woman, with dark circles under her eyes, obviously hungry.

"I need water. You need lizards?"

"How about the girl?"

"She's not for trade," I say and look at her sternly. She stumbles backwards a step. My practice in the mirror as a teenager had obviously paid off.

"Everything's for trade," one of them says from the fire pit, and they all laugh like the junkies they are.

"Not her," I say.

"You can't be wandering with that," and the woman crouches on her knees, "come here little one. Did you miss mommy?" Tee hugs my leg even tighter, obviously scared.

"I say she's for trade," one of the junkies stands up and points a shotgun at me. Shit-fuck.

"Hands on your head, wanderer."

I think about going for my single shot pistol but I don't have a chance with these odds. Several more of them point guns at me, not bothering to stand. The woman in front of me grabs Tee away from my leg violently, holds her by the scruff of her clothes and lets out a hollow laugh. Tee is too scared to move.

"Look, you can take what I got, but she's my daughter and she's mine,"

"We'll take what you got, and your daughter you son of a bitch!" the leader says as he waves his shotgun in my face, his putrid breath makes me gag.

"Tie him up, and the kid."

Out of the dark night there is an inhuman scream, a flash of wings and the woman falls down dropping Tee and writhing in agony, a dark welt spreading

on her exposed shoulder. I grab the shotgun out of the hands of the junkie with strength out of nowhere, turn it on him and fire. I reach out and grab him by the throat, holding him up as several bullets slam into his back, bullets meant for me. There is surprise in his eyes as I drop him to the filthy needle covered ground. Two shotgun blasts later we are safe, surrounded by the dead and Tee is crying and clutching my leg.

"Hold it wastelander," Crap, the lawmaker.

I turn around and there she is, perched in her sniper nest, high on the pile of junk cars, gun pointed at me.

"Those were my friends," she says as I eye the dark barrel of her rifle. But she points it at the sky and smiles.

"They were shitty friends," and she laughs and laughs.

9 THE TRUTH

I grab a jug of what appears to be water and we climb out over the junk. We walk fast away from the drug addicts camp, the lawmaker's laughter echoing in the darkness behind us. It's nighttime and the scorpions will soon be on the prowl. We need a hiding place, badly.

Standing on a hill we look down over yet another nuked town. Not too far off I can see a lit sign that reads "Clinic," but I don't hear a generator. That must have

been where the junkies were getting their shit. We need a destination.

"Where's Triple?" Tee says and I'm glad the lizard is gone.

I take a step forward and my foot clunks on the ground and makes a hollow sound. I get on my hands and knees and start pushing away the dust and dirt, exposing a man-hole cover. I could just make out a message scratched into it: "Please go away."

I pry the lid off the entry and slide it aside and we are hit by a blast of humid air. Do we dare? The clinic is no better a place to go, with a sign like that in the night every wastelander will be headed there. Tee and I lean over the hole, I shine my flashlight on the ladder and follow it down to a dirty white carpeted floor. I can

hear the gentle hum of a generator now, and smell something delicious cooking.

"Hello?"

"Who's there?" a startled reply comes back, the deep voice sounds like a big man.

"We need to hole up, permission to enter sir?" It helps to be polite in the wasteland. It gives people a sense of humanity. A man appears at the base of the ladder and shines his torch up at us.

"You're not a goddamn junkie I hope?"

"No sir, my daughter and I need sanctuary."

I can hear him saying "fuck" over and over under his breath.

"Get lost," and he points a large hand gun at my face.

"I have fresh food and vegetables, I promise we mean you no harm."

"Please mister?" Tee chimes in and puts on a big smile even though she is scared. The man runs his fingers through his hair and sighs loudly.

"Alright. I'm sure I'll regret it. Toss down your weapons."

We do, rather than face the predators of the night, and as we clamber down the ladder I feel his gun press into my buttock.

"Don't try anything. I've got the reflexes of a scorpion and I can crush your skull with my bare hands. You can stay the night but I'm locking you in the spare room. Got it? And you're outta here in the morning."

"Yes sir," I say, stepping off the ladder into the metal corridor.

He's an old man, wearing a green sweater and blue sweatpants. His eyes are alive, watching my every move. I wipe my hand on my shirt and offer it to him.

"I'm Russ, this is Tee," I say as she climbs down next to me.

"Pleasure I'm sure," but he doesn't extend his hand. The man is clean, I have never seen someone that clean, no radiation burns, no dirt, and he's old. I wonder how he survived the endemic rad-poisoning that claims even the strongest of the wastes.

"Just stay off the furniture, and for fucks sake take your boots off, look at my carpet!" The carpet had been ruined long ago, but people have to find their sanity however they can. We take off our shoes but our feet are no cleaner.

"Into the bath with both of you!Now!" It's making out to be a humorous evening. I sense the old man means us no harm.

"Here," he says, pushing us into the next room where there's a shower and a tub. He deposits a small white bar in my hand and an armful of clothes,

"take this soap and wash yourselves, you fucking stink!" and he closes the door.

I look into Tee's green eyes and she looks up at me. "I don't think we're in danger, he seems ok," I say to her as I turn on the shower and help her in. Half an hour later I kick her out and take a turn. Waves of black roll off me and disappear down the drain. It feels great and I don't want to get out of the hot water. The soap is better than the stuff we used to make from ashes and iguana grease, it doesn't leave that half cooked smell on me.

We emerge from the bath in clean clothes and sit down on the floor. The man helped himself to my iguanas and crabapples but that's ok.

"So, what's your story?" He says as he stirs a pot of something delicious smelling on the stove.

"Just wandering," I say as if it was so simple a thing.

"That's not your daughter, she doesn't look like you."

"No sir, I found her in a dresser crying for mom. I think she got left behind while the mother was scavenging."

The man shakes his head, "I hate the wasteland."

I look down at my clean feet and feel sad. I love the wasteland. It's all I have.

It's my only home, away from people and all the pain they bring. I look at Tee.

"You seem like decent folk," the man says, "call me Archie." and he serves us each a bowl of hot soup. Tee lifts hers to her face and slurps greedily but I look at it and wonder. All I had cared about before Tee was the next meal.

"Sir, if you don't mind me asking, how come you're not dead, I mean, where's your radiation burns?"

"Just luck I guess," he says but I know it isn't. “I don’t take rad-out”

I knew about rad-out, it took away the rads but it made folks crazy. We sit down around the dinner table and eat in silence. We finish our food and I feel a pleasant burning sensation through my body and I

become warm and tingly, my strength returning.

"What's the secret ingredient?" I ask.

"Scorpid poison."

"What?"

"You heard me," and he reaches into the cooker and pulls out a whole stinger.

"You've poisoned us,"

"No my lad, you don't understand. The poison kills the rads. You think I'd have my head together if I'd been junking on rad-out?"

"You know, I had a strange experience, Archie, where I got poisoned but the scorpions didn't chase me."

"The scorpions are intelligent."

"Bullshit, they're bugs.

"No, they're smart. They want to help us."

"You're full of it, they're just stupid insects. All you ever hear is people getting killed by those things."

"So let me guess, they surrounded you?"

"Yeah,"

"And turned away?"

"Yeah except for one, and I drank the poison, I don't know why they didn't kill me,"

"It's because you drank. They see a lot of radiation poisoned folk roaming the wastes and the bugs have compassion for them, they don't want them to die the slow radiation death. You drank the poison so they let you go."

I shake my head and look into my bowl, pondering the poisoned meal. I look at the skin on my bare arms and see that my ever present burns had healed into ugly scars somewhere along the way. The old man had obviously lost his marbles though. I don't care if it healed radiation, it's probably just a way for the scorpions to get a healthy meal.

"They'll hunt me again, Archie. They'll kill me next time, I know it."

"You can't escape from a circle of scorpions. Not alive. Not if you’re sick from radiation." he says as he slurps up the last of his soup. The man is in good shape. His arms are like tree trunks and his blue eyes are bright.

"So if they're intelligent, how come they don't build a scorpion town and farm iguanas or something?"

"They're perfectly adapted. You know how they got so big - people hunted them for generations, killed the stupid ones. Now they rule the wastes and look at you, barely surviving, sick from radiation. The scorpions are your friends Russ."

I shake my head. My world is spinning. All those years fleeing from them, all of my friends who had died at their claws.

"So next time,"

"Next time, stay in the circle."

"Why?" But he only smiled.

"The bugs are your friends. Don't forget it."

I shake my head in disbelief. The old man had obviously taken too much rad-out somewhere along the line. Scorpions are my friends? It's too ridiculous to

consider. I'd seen folks get ripped apart by a pack of them, more than once.

"The bugs," he repeats slowly, "The bugs love us."

10 PURPOSE

(Two weeks later)

I awake and lift myself from heavy dreams of scorpions and paper bunnies, the old man's words echoing in my head.

"The bugs love us,"

I shake my head. Archie had obviously lost a marble or two in the wasteland. I stand up and check Tee on the upper bunk. She's still sleeping soundly, dreaming a

child's dreams, maybe of green places, fresh food and water.

I go to the door and I emerge into the common room where the old man is there cleaning his rifle.

"Want to go hunting? You and I should spend some time together, son. You've got a lot to learn if you want to survive out there."

I roll my eyes and take a seat at the breakfast table, where there's already a bowl of food set out,

“I’m alive aren’t I?”

"Hope you like crabapple surprise."

I did like it, surprisingly. I felt the pleasant burning in my veins again.

"You put scorpid poison in everything?"

"Just about. Go into the back room and get a rifle and some wasteland clothing."

I walk past him and enter the storage room. On one racks are twenty rifles of all different kinds. Across from it are boxes and boxes of ammunition. I have never seen so many guns, unclaimed, in great shape. There are boxes of grenades, land mines, and gun parts everywhere. A single plasma grenade rests on its side on the top shelf, and I pocket it. Archie leans in the doorway,

"Whoever set this place up was a gun nut. I've even got a rocket launcher in the back but don't bother, the thing weighs a ton."

I run my hand over the guns as I walk down the narrow aisle and I get a feeling from the goddess and stop. My hand rests on a beautiful gun, with gold inlay and

mahogany stock. I lift it from the rack and examine it.

"Minty's .22. Good choice, but the penetration's not great. You won't kill a grinch with that gun." Archie smiles as he watches me, his great blue eyes crinkling at the edges.

"If I can't kill it with this it's big enough to stay away from."

"It says Minty right on the stock," Archie says and I check the gun. Carved carefully into the wood is a single word "Minty," in a child's scrawl. I run my fingers over the inscription and I know long ago someone had loved this weapon.

"You know, your kiddo is about the age to learn to handle a gun."

"Don't wake her up," I say as I turn to him, "She's dreaming of good things," and I test the weight of the rifle in my hands.

"Have you ever seen a grinch?" I visualized what I had heard about. A mutant creature, black, and ten feet tall, with claws like a great bear, jaws that could crush iron, lizard skin, and covered in sharp spines.

"Oh, a few times. They're not around now so don't worry yourself. They migrate. They're not too hard to kill, as long as you’re not dropping all your shit, pissing yourself, and running in the opposite direction."

"But their hide, it's like kevlar."

"Not between the eyes."

"You’re a good shot I gather?"

"The best. How do you think I got this old, by running away from every slaver?"

I look up and down the rows of ammunition and select a box of .22 cartridges and a leather bandolier to carry the ammo.

"Minty is a .22 repeater, she hold's 20 rounds, you won't need that."

"Yeah but I'm gonna look badass with a bunch of bullets across my chest, don't you think? Styling, right?" and I sport it, making poses, and we both laugh.

The old man smiles and says, "Sure son... Styling." and he seems to drift away in thought, he's eyes scanning the room but seeing nothing, "My wife used to talk like that. She always said, if you're going to wasteland it then do it with style."

Wife. I tried not to think about it.

"You really think Tee is old enough to handle a gun? Don’t you have any legos?"

"Goddamn it don't get her playing with toys, she needs to learn about guns. I've seen younger folks than her do it."

The little girl wanders into the common room and I hear from behind Archie, "Is there any food?"

"On the table, hon," I reply and I hear her pull a chair out and take a seat.

I look up and down the rows of big guns and from in the corner under a cobweb I pull out an old BB gun.

On the side it reads, "Red Riding Hood." There's a red hooded cloak folded up on the shelf and I grab it too.

"This thing work?" I ask Archie.

"Sure does,” he says and I grab a box of BB's from the shelf.

Tee wanders into the doorway beside Archie and looks around, her eyes wide as she scans the rows and rows of weapons, and she takes a handful of his pants and closes her fingers tightly. I hand her the red child's cloak and she slips it on and smiles.

"Here little one, I got you a gift" and I hand her the BB gun. The first thing she does is look down the barrel with one eye squinted shut.

"It's dark in there," she says, and waves it around in one hand.

"Uncle Archie's gonna teach you to handle it today."

He kneels next to her and helps her shoulder it and look down the sight.

"Lesson number one, Tee, that barrel is for killing. Don't point it at yourself or anyone else you love," Archie says as she practices looking down the sight.

"See this lever? You gotta pump up the pressure, see the guage? Don't let it go in the red or it'll break." He helps her pump the lever, "that's enough right there, but don't shoot anything unless you have our permission. The girl nods, and her finger finds the trigger and pulls it.

"Ouch! Fuck!" I say and grab my arm.

Archie laughs, "And rule number 2, don't pull the trigger unless you're aiming at something to kill, ok?" She blushes, "ok."

Archie plucks the BB from my arm with a set of needle-nose pliers and we finish gearing up.

I check out the array of pistols on the other rack and select a big 10 millimeter.

"Ready to go hunting?"

"What are we hunting?"

"Slavers,"

"That's a shitty idea Archie, we should stay the hell away from those people.”

"And what, let them ruin more lives, take more prisoners? There's a pile of ‘em at the clinic, probably all dosed up."

I shake my head, but I see his point. The wasteland needs champions, but there are none, not in the heat, dust, fear and decay. Just amateurs.

"Why don't we steer clear?"

His eyes darken and his face turns angry.

"I'll do it without you then ya goddamn wuss. My wife was taken by slavers and I'm gonna kill those bastards with or without you," and I get it.

"Ok, ok.. But can we leave Tee out of it? She's too young to understand."

"No," Tee chimes in, leaning her weapon on the wall "I get it. They're bad people, and we're good people, and they have to die. They take people and chain them and hurt them. We gotta do it dad," she says, looking at me sternly with her hands on her hips. My heart hurts at what she has called me. Maybe I will meet the same fate, to save Tee. I know I will do it in a heartbeat if I have to.

"Ok ok, I'm in," and I grab a couple fragmentation grenades from the shelf, and hand one to Archie.

We will be the champions of the wasteland today. Does that make us good, like Tee said? I don't know. But the mission feels great, like fresh blood in my veins. Purpose. Every wastelander needs a purpose, beyond white carpet, beyond the next iguana, and Archie has his. And now, so do we.

Today, we will become murderers of murderers.

11 AMBUSH

The three of us circle the town and lay down on a grassy knoll about a hundred yards off from our target, in the shade of a broken old shack. Outside the clinic we can see someone smashing windows up

and down the street. The tinkling of broken glass carries to us on the wind. Archie looks through his scope and surveys the scene.

"I can see two more inside. They must be done looting cause they're smashing the place up."

"Any slaves?" I ask him

"No, don't see any,"

"How do you know they're slavers?"

"Trust me, I know,"

"No really, they could just be scavengers. How do you know?"

He looks at me angrily and I close my mouth.

"They took my wife, that's how I know," he says with a grimace and I turn back to the clinic sheepishly.

I look over as Tee pumps up her BB gun, licks her finger and touches the sight. I half wondered where she had learned to do that, what she had been through before I met her, rescued her. I take up sights myself, using a rock to rest the barrel of Minty's .22.

"When they come out, they're going to head to the junkies camp to pick up slaves. When they come around that building they'll be coming towards us and we'll have a clear shot. Don't open fire until I do. Tee, guard the rear. " Archie says as he settles in with his sniper rifle, playing with the gauges.

"Yes sir!" she says, and salutes him. I couldn't help but laugh quietly. She turns around and uses her bird watching binoculars to scan the horizon, "I see Triple!" she says and points excitedly up

in the air. I glance up but it's only a vulture, circling us far overhead.

A half an hour passes as we watch and wait. Finally the two slavers emerge from the clinic to join the third man and they walk westward, just like Archie said they would. They round the corner and come towards us.

"On the count of four," Archie says, steadying his breath.

"What? You mean three?" I say.

"No goddamnit I said four!"

"Ok ok!" I stammer.

"One... Two... Three... Four!"

We open fire on the three slavers. Archie's target goes down and doesn't move. I must have winged mine in the ear because he grabs at his head and goes to take cover, but there is none. I fire again

while Archie ejects the clip and this time I make my mark, and hit him right in the heart. He falls down. The third let's off a clip of automatic weapon fire in our direction but Archie takes him out, his head exploding all over a junk car.

"Was that all of them?"

"I think so. Let's check it out. Maybe they've got some tech we can use.

Tee fires a shot and we both startle and turn,

"Got him!" She says triumphantly and dashes off to claim her prize, a skinny brown iguana.

"Don't move," a gruff voice says as a stranger emerges from behind the shack, holding an AK-47.

Archie and I lay prone on the ground and put our hands up. Tee points her rifle

at him from ten feet away. I hear a flapping of wings and Triple lands next to Tee and starts hissing loudly, her stinger tail swinging back and forth in agitation. The stranger is surprised but his gun is steady.

"You don't move!" she says, a gleam in her eye as she pumps up her toy rifle. Fuck.

The man shifts his gun from us to Tee. The lizard starts making an awful sound and barfs up its lunch.

"Don't move or I kill the girl" he says, looking right into my eyes.

"Don't shoot!" I say, begging him. Tee is my life, don't take away my life. I whisper prayers to an absent god.

Tee opens fire right at the man's face. In an instant he falls to the ground and we

grab our weapons and secure the area. No one else is around. I check the man's pulse, it's faint but he's still alive. I'd never seen a man stopped by a BB gun and I check his face. There's no wounds but his nose is bleeding.

"What the hell is that thing," Archie says, aiming his pistol at the lizard. I put my hand on his and lower it, "it's her pet, or something." He raises an eyebrow but says nothing.

"Good shot, Tee.. I think that BB went right up his nose and scrambled his brain," I tell her.

"Is he a slaver? How do we know now if he's good or bad?" Tee says, wondering as she slings her BB gun and picks up the flying lizard in her arms.

"What do we do with him?" I ask Archie, who stands with his pistol ready.

"He's a bad one Tee. Russ, just kill the bastard and get it done with. You want me to do it?" Archie says.

"No... Let me do it. Do you want to say last words?"

"Fuck no, he doesn't deserve an afterlife. He was gonna kill Tee, you heard him."

The lizard sniffs at the air, struggles free of Tee and flies off, obviously on its own agenda. I stand over the man and look down into his glazed eyes. His breath is shallow and his arm twitches a little. There's a black heart tattoo on his neck with the name Megan writ underneath. Archie gathers Tee and turns her away.

I wonder who he was, why he wandered the wasteland. He might have been a good man, the wasteland makes murderers of good men every day. Maybe he just needed a meal. Maybe he was just opportunistic. Maybe someone, maybe Megan loved him. Or to him, maybe, we were the murderers.

I blow his brains out all over the hill and the noise of the shot echoes back and forth across the valley, the lilting sound of another man greeting a quick death.

"One less asshole in the wasteland," Archie says.

"Do we bury him?" Tee asks, looking up at Archie.

Archie walks up and kicks dust in the man's face. He kicks the man in the head

for long minutes afterwards, his face frozen in a wicked smile of revenge.

"Good enough," he says, and walks away, slinging his rifle on his shoulder.

Tee walks up to look at the wastelander and Archie goes to move her away but I stop him. "She's got to understand," I tell him, and all three of us look down at the dead man.

"Am I a murderer?" she says, looking up at me with glistening eyes. I kneel next to her, take her by the shoulders and shake my head, looking hard into her beautiful turquoise eyes.

"No Tee, killing a bad man doesn't make you a murderer. You were just defending yourself. You didn't just kill him cause you’re mean or for the fun of it. You had to do it. You saved me Tee.

You saved us both. I'm sure he was a slaver, or worse," I hug her tight and don't let go for a long time. A child's innocence, traded for our lives.

12 ALIVE

Archie, Tee and I sit around the dinner table munching on roast iguana. It tastes better than when we roast them over irradiated wood. I could get used to this life.

"You any good at repairing things?" Archie asks me between mouthfuls.

"Like what?" I say, wiping my mouth with my sleeve.

"Robots?"

"You got tools?"

"Plenty.. Let me show you what I've been working on."

Archie leads me through the storage room and into his workshop and closes the door. There are sphere-bots everywhere, small round machines that once hovered in the air, bent and broken antennas sticking out in strange directions. Usually they wander the wastes broadcasting nonsense, but these are all silent, some with scorch marks, others with bullet holes, and still others in pieces around the room. One of them sits under his worklamp with a pile of hand tools around it. A bright orange one lay in the corner with a layer of dust.

"I've been trying to repair these sphere-bots.. I got one working awhile back but it

shot me with a laser and I smashed it. I don't know if it's a lost cause or what."

"You've got enough parts here, I can probably get one working. What about that orange one in the corner?"

"It's trash, I couldn't get it working."

I pick it up and examine it. It's got a triple shot laser weapon mounted on the bottom. In green letters across the side it reads 'Google (c) friend model 2021'. In the back is an inset reset button and I take a paperclip from the work-desk and poke it in. I feel all over it and my finger finds a catch and I press. A small plate pops off and I toggle the switch underneath.

The small robot whirs to life and levitates off my hand, the hard drive light flashing and I can hear the inside parts

working, thinking. A tinny woman's voice begins to speak.

"Scanning, Scanning, Scanning."

"Good job, what did you do?" Archie says to me.

"Turned it on."

"Brilliant, I should have tried that." he says and makes a funny face.

"Scanning. Hello companion! My name is Five Alive, would you like to rename me?"

"Yes Anastasia," I speak slowly and clearly.

"Call me Anna!" it sounds like a text message read by an exaggerated artificial voice, meant maybe for interacting with children.

"Ok Anna. How are you feeling?"

"Grrrrrrrreat! Like a tiger!" that could be problematic, and I laugh.

"Got any mechanical problems?"

"I can't feel my claws,"

"You haven't got any. Anything else?"

"Yes I can't see anything," she says, her speakers crackling

I notice the faceplate is cracked and scorched. I can probably switch it out for one that's whole. I reach around behind her and switch her off and she falls into my open hand. I unscrew the faceplate and switch it out with one that isn't broken.

"It works... Anything else, Archie?" and I see him looking at the floor, his eyes closed, brow furrowed. He looks up at me, sadness in his eyes.

"Yeah, can you fix me too?"

We stand there looking at each other for a long time, and I know what he means but I ask anyway.

"You said what?"

"I don't want to live, Russ," he says and I crack the door to check that Tee isn't near us and I hear the water running, she's taking a long shower.

"What you want me to shoot you in the face like that raider? C'mon Archie. You think your wife would want you to kill yourself? What if you'd done it a week ago and the junkies had taken over your roost? Tee and I would be dead right now. You know, maybe we can find your wife. The wasteland needs people like you. Tee needs us," and I need you, Archie, I need you and your white carpet.

"Maybe your right..." and he leaves me in the room full of robot carcasses and closes the door, and I hear his heavy, slow steps recede into the common room.

I look around me and can't help but feel sad for the sphere-bots. Once, they had been alive, had had purpose and joy, whatever joy a computer can experience. But they are machines, built on a mininuke power plant, built to survive. They don’t have experiences, they're dead matter, they're just computers. Robots don't have thoughts and feelings.

I put down Anna on the workbench, put my head in my hands, rub at my face hard, and look around me at all the death. Or maybe I was just looking within myself. Archie, the machines... Even though they seem alive, they're dead inside.

13 BASIC NEEDS

In the morning Archie stews something up on the stove and serves me a steaming cup of coffee while Tee and I sit around the table expectantly.

"What's the agenda today, Archie? More murdering?"

"No.. But we need to make a supply run."

"What for, you've got ten of everything here."

"We're out of coffee."

"Oh, it's an emergency. Can't you live without it?" In the wasteland, you live without everything. I'm lucky each day that I wake up with even a shred of

humanity, that's about all I've got left. He glares at me.

"You don't want to see me without my coffee. I want you to make a run down to the gas station. Last time I was there they had a basement full of food. I locked it on my way out." and he hands me a key.

"Think you can handle that, soldier?" he says.

"First of all, I ain't a soldier. Second of all, you want me to risk my life for coffee?"

I took a sip and the hot liquid going down my throat feels great. I look into my cup, at the swirling darkness. I suppose we all need to keep our humanity alive, however we can. Life has to have meaning. Coffee has meaning.

"I'll get your coffee, Archie.. Why don't we go together, for safety."

"I'm headed to Oasis to trade, I need some parts. You can handle it yourself. I'll be back in four days. Oh and watch out for ghouls." and he picks up a duffle bag and climbs up the ladder and he's gone.

Ghouls. Ages ago, the bombs fell, and many chemical and biological weapons were unleashed. Most who survived these days were immune, but the few who weren't became feral monsters who came out at night, flesh melting away, losing their senses until all they wanted was meat. Any meat.

"Well Tee, I guess it's just you and me now."

"He's coming back, right?"

"Yeah, I hope so. I guess I've gotta head out too, why don't you stay here for the day?"

"Don't go," she says, and she grabs my hand and squeezes hard.

It's a stupid mission. Go into the ruins of the town and get coffee. I'd scavenged medical equipment to save lives, I'd hunted slavers, I'd brought back iguanas when there was no food, I'd fought off a ghoul with my own hands, just to save someone I didn't know. Coffee for Archie. What's the point? But I know. It’s the same with him and his white carpet. I know the truth. Coffee represents sanity, humanity to him.

"You're safe here, Tee. I'll turn on the sphere-bot so you've got someone to play with. I don't want you leaving here,

understand? And if I'm not back tonight you tuck yourself in ok?"

"Ok.. You'll be back?"

"I'll be back."

I go into the storeroom and I turn on the orange sphere-bot.

"Scanning.Scanning. Tools detected. Executing self repair protocol."

The sphere-bot starts poking around the room, pulling parts from here and there with it's small pincer arm. I walk through the kitchen and Tee walks behind me to the ladder entrance.

"You'll be back?"

"You got it kiddo. And if I'm not, you stay put. Don't play outside, see if that sphere-bot knows any indoor games alright?"

"Ok," she says, dejected. And I climb up the ladder and emerge into the blinding light of another day in the wastes. I lower my goggles and slide the manhole cover back over the entrance while Tee looks up a me from within. I push a pile of dust over it to hide it and I'm off to see the wizard.

Coffee. At least I have purpose, and white carpet to come back to, and a child who loves me. I see Archie in the hot distance, wavering in the heat . I scan the horizon with my binoculars and I see a scorpion chasing after an unknown wastelander, and I remember what Archie said. Now he's pinned to the ground, and the scorpion is stabbing him and stabbing him with his tail, over and over, dust flying into the air. Why did it attack? Was it because he ran? It begins to eat its

unlucky quarry, and Archie's words echo in my mind. The bugs are my friends. Don't run. Yeah, right.

The things a man will do for a cup of coffee.

14 GHOULS

I skirt around the remains of the town, heading for the gas station that Archie had mentioned. Occasionally I stop and scan the horizon with my binoculars but things are quiet.

Several hours later I'm at the station. Inside is chaos, overturned desks, rusty shelving in piles, and I pick up a pack of cigarettes from the ground as I head towards the basement. There's a giant rat

in the stairwell, the size of a dog, munching on a box of sugar bomb cereal. It looks at me and growls and hisses, and I take out my 10mm pistol and I shoot at it but it darts away into the shadows. I hear it hissing vehemently as I step downwards into the darkness, but I'm through the basement door before it can retaliate.

I shine my flashlight around. Someone had been living here, long ago. There's empty boxes of food and bottles of water next to a cot in the corner. There's a dried up corpse there on cot, with a six shooter in its dessicated hand, and a stain on the wall where the person must have blown out their own brains. Something moves in the shadows and as I turn I get a glimpse of some small animal disappearing out of the broken basement window. I poke

around and find a box of freeze dried coffee and shove it in my pack.

I hear sounds now from the first level, footsteps. I make my way silently to the door and I can see at the top of the stairs a ghoul, it's face burned by the sun, it's flesh hanging off it in strips, probably attracted by the gunfire. I close the door and lock it just before it throws itself down the stairway at me and hits the door with a thud. I hear it now, sniffing, and the rat hissing, and there's a squabble and the scream of a ghoul making a kill.

I see several shadows pass the window and soon I hear more ruckus up above, crashing, smashing and snarling. A small animal darts in the broken window and into a dark corner.

I shake my head. It's always something in the wasteland. I decide to wait and see

if things quiet down. A small cat with ginger colored fur emerges from the shadows as I push the body off the cot and sit down. She meows plaintively, her tail slowly twitching left, then right.

"Hey little one. I bet your thirsty?" and I notice the bowl next to the cot. I pour some water in it and she drinks it down. She puts her little paws on my leg and stretches and purrs.

"You're friendly.. Looks like your owner didn't survive though." I slowly reach forward and she shoves her head up against my gloved hand.

"Looks like we'll be here for a while." she jumps into my lap and curls up, looking up at me with big yellow eyes. She startles as there's another crash from up above and she leaps away, her fur on

end. We wait together for several hours and things quiet down up above.

"It's time for me to go. Think it's safe girl?" I whisper and I quietly crack the basement door and look up into the light. All that's left of the ghouls is a rat corpse glistening in the light of my torch, eaten to the bone, not a shred of flesh left on it.

I ease my way up the stairs, wincing at the sound of the creaking wooden steps, but the gas station is empty except for me and the cat. It's getting dark out and I don't want to travel in the night, with the scorpions on the prowl. I have to get back to Tee, I know she will be scared if I don't come home.

I stand in the doorway and look out over the nuked town. I take out my new geiger counter and take a reading. It clicks madly and I know the place is

irradiated as hell. Things are quiet, except for the distant shriek of a ghoul making another kill.

I take two steps out the door and something lands heavily on my back and I fall forward on my face. It bites into my armored neck and I yell, flipping over and throwing the ghoul off of me. I stand quickly but it lunges at me and I'm down again, wrestling with what once was a human being.

It screams and I bash it in the head with my geiger counter as hard as I can. It goes limp and I push it off myself and stand up. It's a pitiful creature, half rotted, missing an eye and its nose, and I stomp hard on it's head and it splushes into a pile of goo.

I make my way hastily away from there, away from the town and its denizens. Soon I am in the wasteland

again, dust in every direction and my heart beat slows down. The cat has followed me. She looks up at me and lets out a quiet meow. She jumps up into my arms and pushes her head against my chin. I scratch her ears with my hand.

"How did you survive out here little one?" I say but she only looks at me with those yellow eyes. It's nighttime now and I know the scorpions will be on the prowl. I scan the horizon with my binoculars and I see a dust storm coming from the west. I make haste towards home but the storm overtakes me and I have to take shelter in a beaten old shack.

I wrestle a piece of old sheet metal across the door and the cat and I sit and wait. Eventually I fall asleep, my head resting on a leather suitcase, the cat on my chest purring. I wake in the night with a

start and I can hear the snapping claws of scorpions outside, but we are safe in the shack. I peek out between the broken boards and I can see them encircling the hut.

I awake in the morning, the cat sleeping on my chest, she rubs her head on my chin as if to say "let's get going." I emerge from the shack and the scorpions are gone, the only sign is the telltale trail they leave as they left, the imprints in the dust of many scorpid feet as they wandered off, searching for quarry elsewhere.

I have survived the night and I hope Tee is safe and sound, and Archie too. Would she stay in the bomb shelter like I had told her? I walk towards home now, with the kitty trailing on my heels. She catches grasshoppers here and there and crunches them up.

Survivors gather together. It's the way of the wastes, if you see a friendly face, you stick to it. I wonder why the man in the gas station had killed himself, was he lonely, or a junkie without a fix? Maybe he had just needed water, or maybe, he couldn't escape from there with the ghouls around. I don't know but I wonder anyway. Was he a good man, a bad man? You can never tell just from looking at a corpse. I have seen one too many in my life.

15 THE EDGE

Before long I reach the underground shelter. I pick up the cat and carry her

down the ladder. Inside, Tee is playing a game of cards with the sphere-bot.

"Hey I made a new friend," I say to her and I put the kitty down at my feet.

Tee runs over and picks her up, hugs and kisses and squeezes her, rubbing her face in the fur and she smiles at me. She puts the kitty down and takes her seat again at the table where there's playing cards spread around.

"Hey, what game are you playing? You sleep ok last night?" I ask her. She gives me a big hug.

"Yeah Anna sung me songs," and my heart skips a beat but I realize she means the sphere-bot. Anna was my wife's name.

"Oh good, you didn't go outside right?"

"No. Not really."

I kick my shoes off to preserve Archie's white carpet. and I sit down heavily at the table, exhausted.

"We're playing Egyptian rat fuck."

"What?"

"Egyptian-"

"I heard you.. How do you play?"

"Well, each person or robot takes a turn playing a card from the top of her pile. Then if the cards match you have to slap the pile first, and then you put those on the bottom of your pile. Whoever has all the cards wins."

"Your mom teach you that?"

"No, Anna did."

"Anna, what other games do you know?"

"I know 1024 playing card games."

A thousand and twenty four games. I don't know any, I never learned. Never have the time, I’m usually too busy chasing iguanas to learn card games.

I heard the manhole open and Archie appeared at the bottom of the ladder.

"Hey old man, you're home early."

"I met a wandering trader, was able to get the parts I needed. He told me an interesting story too.

"Yeah let's hear the story."

"Well, he got this glazed look in his eye and started going on about some junkie he'd met who'd seen the edge of the wasteland."

"The edge? I just assumed it goes on."

"Well, this trader paraphrased it for me, I guess the junkie said there's some kind of chaos at the edge. Chaos that'll make

you lose your mind, and the junkie insisted he was a dead scorpion somewhere, that he had baby scorpions to feed and he needed to get back there."

"Wow, sounds like the guy had a bad trip to me."

"Maybe,"

"What do you mean 'maybe,' that sounds like a bunch of baked bullshit."

"I've been to the edge, never beyond, but I saw the edge."

"Fuck, really? What did you see?"

"Ten thousand things. I saw a smiling family around a dinner table eating meat and vegetables, I saw the wasteland, green with life, I saw human like robots in a junkyard. I saw great reptilian beasts, hunting one another."

"All that in one look?"

“There's a barrier, a swirling barrier of images. I didn't go onwards. I saw my wife, but I didn't go."

"What the hell are you talking about Archie? You sound like a madman."

"I can't say I understood what I saw, but it’s like reality was fractured, you know, the bombs must have done it. And I found a pile of clothes there, gun and ammo, like someone had just disappeared right out of their clothes."

"You're mad Archie. You were probably dreaming, or rad-sick." He looks sternly at me and says in his deep voice, "I wasn't."

"So there's some kind of chaos out there, but where?"

"A hundred days west of here, in the middle of the ruined city.”

"A hundred days? How the hell did you survive the radiation?”

"The scorpions helped me, they came at night and fed me, protected me."

"Yeah, right. Obviously you left your marbles somewhere old man. There's no edge of the wasteland, it just goes on and on, dust and iguanas in every direction."

"You're wrong, Russ. I was there. You have to see it to understand." And I want to. Archie had seen his wife there, in some kind of chaos storm. Do I have a chance of reuniting with mine? I know she's dead, and I am only dreaming, but I find purpose. Maybe there’s a chance I can see her again, even for a moment.

"I've got to see it Archie."

"To hell you do, that journey nearly killed me. Stay here with Tee and me, and

sip coffee and put your feet up. You're not a wanderer anymore."

But I am. I will always be. The wasteland is my home, being safe is boring. I have to see whatever it was Archie had seen. I have to see, if my wife was there too. And I know that I will leave Archie and Tee behind. I will be a lone wanderer again, a tourist in the wastes.

"Archie, mark my words. I'll see you in 200 days." and I feel invigorated, a new sense of life pouring into me, a mission of my own making, a chance to maybe see my wife. I, like Archie, have lost my will to live somewhere along the line. I love Tee and him but that's only a bandage on a broken will. I want to see my wife, desperately, and I will do whatever I have to do to see her one last time, even if it

means evaporating into nothingness, leaving my clothes in a pile and disappearing into some kind of fractured reality.

16 GOODBYE

"Before you go, Russ, I've got something for you," Archie says as he sips his coffee.

"Oh yeah? What?"

"Armor."

He leads me into the backroom and opens up a crate. Inside there's a suit of green armor, chestplates and all.

"It's got a respirator in the helmet, and it'll recycle your urine and your breath.

See this tube? Just bite on it and drink. This suit brought me back from hell in one piece. I've got a fresh micro-cell for it. It's got a built in computer and radar system and it should warn you if anything comes within 500 meters of you. It'll deflect bullets, but the higher caliber ones maybe not. And if we're lucky I should be able to communicate with you over the radio."

I run my hand over the armor's sleek surface, and I know my chances of surviving the wastes will be much better with an ally like this. I take off my clothes down to my underwear and I put on the armor. I raise the face visor and examine the suit.

"How do I look?"

"Stylin." and we both smile.

"You'll be ok, you'll take care of Tee?"

"Yeah we'll be alright. I made it to old age didn't I?"

"You sure did, old man."

"That's right, sure as hell I did. Tee will be fine."

I think he understands why I have to go.

"I'll miss you, son."

"two hundred days. I'll be back before you know it."

"I hope so. It'll be lonely here without your ugly face."

"I'll miss you too Archie."

"Promise me one thing, Russ."

"What's that?"

"Don't walk beyond the shimmering wall."

"Why?"

"You'll lose your mind. There's nothing there but chaos and death," he looks me in the eyes. "Here, you'd better take the sphere-bot. It'll interface with your suit, and warn you of danger." and he turns to the orange sphere-bot on the bench and powers it on.

"Take care of Russ ok? Designate companion Russell. Lock command," he says to the machine. The sphere-bot beeps in recognition.

I walk in the common room and Tee is there, hugging the kitty. She puts it down and wraps her arms around me.

"I love you, Russ."

"I love you too, Tee. Take good care of uncle Archie for me, ok, and the ginger cat too."

"Ok, I will. You're coming back right? You promise you'll never die?"

"I promise." and I kiss her on the cheek and she sniffles.

I shoulder my rifle and my pack and the three of us emerge into the wasteland. The day is dark, and there's soundless lightning on the horizon.

The three of us hug one last time and I turn and leave. A hundred days each way. I don't know if I'll survive the journey. I turn and I wave goodbye but the two of them are already back in the bunker and I am alone again. Alone except for the sphere-bot hovering at my side, its antennae twitching.

"Can you hear me Russ?" and I fumble with the button on the arm labeled 'transmit.'

"I hear you Archie."

"Good. Be careful out there. Over and out."

I take the wasteland, one step after another. The day becomes dark, and the sphere-bot chimes in.

"Large insects detected, 100 meters and closing," and I can hear the chattering claws already.

"Large insects, 30 meters and closing." I open up the com and press transmit.

"Archie, the scorpions are coming."

"Good, remember what I said?" he responds, the comm crackling a bit.

"The bugs love me,"

"They sure do, Russ. They're your friends and don't forget it. Over and out."

Soon they surround me, ten of them, bigger than a truck, claws clacking and jaws clicking. One of them leans it's stinger forward, a drop of poison on the end, while the others all turn away. I take the stinger in my mouth and drink like a newborn, my pain fading away. I unroll my bedroll and fall asleep in the circle of now silent guardians, while Anna the sphere-bot keeps watch. It will be a long trip, a worthwhile journey always is.

Welcome to the dust.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Russell Ackerman is an information age survivor who lives in Maine. He is currently pursuing a degree in psychology, does gardening work in the summer and

sometimes works winters at the local ski lift.

Author’s final thought:

There is no greater apocalypse than the apocalypse of the self.